

## Chapter 12

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# TRADITION AND CHANGE IN EUROPEAN CULTURE, 1300–1500

**B**y 1300 the civilization of Europe appeared to have settled into stable and self-assured patterns. Society as a whole shared assumptions about religious beliefs, about the appropriate way to integrate faith with the heritage of the ancient world, about the purposes of scholarship, and about the forms of literature and art. These shared assumptions have led historians to describe the outlook of the age as “the medieval synthesis.” But such moments of apparent stability rarely last long. Within a few generations, profound doubts had arisen on such fundamental questions as the nature of religious faith, the authority of the Church, the aims of scholarship, the source of moral ideals, and the standards of beauty in the arts. As challenges to old ideas arose, especially in the worlds of religion and cultural expression, there was an outpouring of creativity that has dazzled us ever since. Because those who sought new answers tended to look for guidance to what they considered a better past—the ancient world, or the early days of Christianity—and sought to revive long-lost values, their efforts, and the times in which they lived, have been called an age of rebirth, or Renaissance.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The creator of the modern view of the Renaissance as one of the formative periods of Western history, and the single most influential historian of the subject, was Jacob Burckhardt (see Recommended Reading).

CHAPTER 12. TRADITION AND CHANGE IN EUROPEAN CULTURE							
	Social Structure	Body Politic	Changes in the Organization of Production and in the Impact of Technology	Evolution of Family and Changing Gender Roles	War	Religion	Cultural Expression
I. THE NEW LEARNING							
II. ART AND ARTISTS IN THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE							
III. THE CULTURE OF THE NORTH							
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## I. The New Learning

Although traditional forms of learning remained vital in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, medieval Scholasticism, with its highly refined forms of reasoning, had little to offer Europe's small but important literate lay population. The curriculum was designed mainly to train teachers and theologians, whereas the demand was increasingly for practical and useful training, especially in the arts of persuasion and communication: good speaking and good writing. For many, the Scholastics also failed to offer moral guidance. As Petrarch emphasized, education was meant to help people lead a wise, pious, and happy life. A central aim of the Renaissance was to develop new models of virtue and a system of education that would do exactly that.

### ◆ THE FOUNDING OF HUMANISM

One minor branch of the medieval educational curriculum, rhetoric, was concerned with the art of good speaking and writing. More and more, its practitioners in Italy began to turn to the Latin classics for models of good writing. Their interest in the Classical authors was helped by the close

relationship between the Italian language and Latin, by the availability of manuscripts, and by the presence in Italy of countless Classical monuments. It was rhetoricians who first began to argue, in the late thirteenth century, that education should be reformed to give more attention to the classics and to help people lead more moral lives.

These rhetoricians were to found an intellectual movement known as Humanism. The term *Humanism* was not coined until the nineteenth century. In fifteenth-century Italy, *humanista* signified a professor of humane studies or a Classical scholar, but eventually *Humanism* came to mean Classical scholarship—the ability to read, understand, and appreciate the writings of the ancient world. Humanist education helped its students master the classics, so they could learn both the wisdom they needed to choose the right way in life and the eloquence that could persuade others to follow that same way. The modern use of the word *humanism* to denote a secular philosophy that denies an afterlife has no basis in the Renaissance. Most Renaissance humanists read the Church fathers as avidly as they read pagan authors and believed that the highest virtues were rooted in piety. Humanism sought far more to enrich than to undermine traditional religious attitudes.



**Petrarch** The most influential early advocate of Humanism was Francesco Petrarca, known as Petrarch (1304–1374). He was a lawyer and cleric who practiced neither of those professions but rather devoted his life to writing poetry, scholarly and moral treatises, and letters. He became famous for his Italian verse—his sonnets inspired poets for centuries—but he sought above all to emulate Virgil by writing a Latin epic poem. A master of self-promotion, he used that work as the occasion for reviving the ancient title of “poet laureate” and having himself crowned in Rome in 1341. But he was also capable of profound self-examination. In a remarkable work, which he called *My Secret*—a dialogue with one of his heroes, St. Augustine—he laid bare his struggles to achieve spiritual peace despite the temptations of fame and love. Increasingly, he became concerned that nowhere in the world around him could he find a model of virtuous behavior that he could respect. The leaders of the Church he considered poor examples, for they seemed worldly and materialistic. Convinced that no guide from his own times or the immediate past would serve, Petrarch concluded that he had to turn to the Church fathers and the ancient Romans to find worthy examples of the moral life (see “Petrarch on Ancient Rome,” p. 404).

How could one be a good person? By imitating figures from antiquity, such as Cicero and Augustine, who knew what proper values were and pursued them in their own lives, despite temptations and the distractions of public affairs. The period between their time and his own—which Petrarch regarded as the “middle” ages—he considered contemptible. His own world, he felt, would improve only if it tried to emulate the ancients, and he believed that education ought to teach what they had done and said. In particular, like the good rhetorician he was, he believed that only by restoring the mastery of the written and spoken word that had distinguished the great Romans—an imitation of their style, of the way they had conveyed their ideas—could his contemporaries learn to behave like the ancients.

**Boccaccio** The program Petrarch laid out soon caught fire in Florence, the city from which his family had come and in which he found influential friends and disciples. The most important

was the poet and writer Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375). He became famous in Florence for a collection of short stories known as *The Decameron*, written between 1348 and 1351. It recounts how a group of young Florentines—seven women and three men—fled during the Black Death of 1348 to a secluded villa, where for ten days each told a story. The first prose masterpiece in Italian, *The Decameron*’s frank treatment of sex and its vivid creation of ordinary characters make it one of the first major works in Western letters intended to divert and amuse rather than edify. But in his later years Boccaccio grew increasingly concerned with the teaching of moral values, and he became a powerful supporter of Petrarch’s ideas.

**The Spread of Humanism** In the generation after Petrarch and Boccaccio, Humanism became a rallying cry for the intellectual leaders of Florence. They argued that, by associating their city with the revival of antiquity, Florentines would be identified with a distinctive vision that would become the envy of their rivals elsewhere in Italy. And that was indeed what happened. The campaign for a return to the classics started a revolution in education that soon took hold throughout Italy; the writing and speaking skills the humanists emphasized came to be in demand at every princely court (including that of the papacy); and the crusade to study and imitate the ancients transformed art, literature, and even political and social values.

Led by the chancellor of Florence, Coluccio Salutati (whose position, as the official who prepared the city’s official communications, required training in rhetoric), a group of humanists began to collect ancient manuscripts and form libraries, so as to make accessible virtually all the surviving writings of Classical Latin authors. These Florentines also wanted to regain command of the Greek language, and in 1396 they invited a Byzantine scholar to lecture at the University of Florence. In the following decades—troubled years for the Byzantine Empire—other Eastern scholars joined the exodus to the West, and they and Western visitors returning from the East brought with them hundreds of Greek manuscripts. By the middle of the fifteenth century, Western scholars had both the philological skill and the manuscripts to

## PETRARCH ON ANCIENT ROME

*Petrarch was so determined to relive the experience of antiquity that he wrote letters to famous Roman authors as if they were acquaintances. In one letter, he even described Cicero coming to visit him. While he was passing through Padua in February 1350, he recalled that the city was the birthplace of the Roman historian Livy, and he promptly wrote to him.*

"I only wish, either that I had been born in your time or you in ours. If the latter, our age would have benefited; if the former, I myself would have been the better for it. I would surely have visited you. As it is, I can merely see you reflected in your works. It is over those works that I labor whenever I want to forget the places, times, and customs around me. I am often filled with anger at today's morals, when people value only gold and silver, and want nothing but physical pleasures.

"I have to thank you for many things, but especially because you have so often helped me forget the evils of today, and have transported me to happier times. As I read you, I seem to be living with Scipio, Brutus, Cato, and many others. It is with

them that I live, and not with the ruffians of today, among whom an evil star had me born. Oh, the great names that comfort me in my wretchedness, and make me forget this wicked age! Please greet for me those older historians like Polybius, and those younger than you like Pliny.

"Farewell forever, you unequalled historian!

"Written in the land of the living, in that part of Italy where you were born and buried, in sight of your own tombstone, on the 22nd of February in the 1350th year after the birth of Him whom you would have seen had you lived longer."

Petrarch, *Epistolae Familiares*, 24.8. Passages selected and translated by Theodore K. Rabb.

establish direct contact with the most original minds of the Classical world, and they were making numerous Latin and Italian translations of Greek works. Histories, tragedies, lyric poetry, the dialogues of Plato, many mathematical treatises, and the most important works of the Greek fathers of the Church fully entered Western culture for the first time.

**Civic Humanism** Salutati and his contemporaries and successors in Florence are often called civic humanists because they stressed that participation in public affairs is essential for full human development. Petrarch had wondered whether individuals should cut themselves off from the larger world, with its corruptions and compromises, and focus only on what he called the contemplative life, or try to improve that world through an active life. Petrarch's models had offered no clear answer. Cicero had suggested the need for both lives, but Augustine had been fearful of outside temptations. In the generations following Petrarch, however, the doubts declined, and the humanists argued that only by participating in public life, seeking higher ends for one's so-

ciety as well as oneself, could an individual be truly virtuous. Republican government was the best form, they argued, because unless educated citizens made use of their wisdom for the benefit of all, their moral understanding would not benefit their societies. These were lessons exemplified by the ancient classics, and thus in one connected argument the civic humanists defended the necessity of studying the ancients, the superiority of the active life, and the value of Florentine republican institutions.

## ◆ HUMANISM IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

As the humanist movement gained in prestige, it captured all of Italy. Pope Nicholas V (1447–1455), for example, founded a library in the Vatican that was to become the greatest repository of ancient manuscripts in Italy. And princely courts, such as those of the Gonzaga family at Mantua and the Montefeltro family at Urbino, gained fame because of their patronage of humanists. Moreover, the influence of antiquity was felt in all areas of learning and writing. Literature was



profoundly influenced by the ancients, as a new interest in Classical models reshaped the form and content of both poetry and drama, from the epic to the bawdy comedy. Purely secular themes, without religious purpose, became more common. And works of history grew increasingly analytic, openly acknowledging inspiration from ancient writers such as Livy.

**Education** Perhaps the most direct effect was on education itself. Two scholars from the north of Italy, Guarino da Verona and Vittorino da Feltre, succeeded in turning the diffuse educational ideas of the humanists into a practical curriculum. Guarino argued for a reform of traditional methods of education, and Vittorino brought the new methods to their fullest development in the various schools he founded, especially his Casa Giocosa ("Happy House") at Mantua. The pupils included boys and girls, both rich and poor (the latter on scholarships). All the students learned Latin and Greek, mathematics, music, and philosophy; in addition—because Vittorino believed that education should aid physical, moral, and social development—they were taught social graces, such as dancing and courteous manners, and received instruction in physical exercises like riding and fencing. Vittorino's school attracted pupils from all over Italy, and his methods were widely imitated.

Ultimately, a humanist education was to give the elite throughout Europe a new way of measuring social distinction. It soon became apparent that the ability to quote Virgil or some other ancient writer was not so much a sign of moral seriousness as a badge of superiority. What differentiated people was whether they could use or recognize the quotations, and that was why the new curriculum was so popular—even though it seemed to consist, more and more, of endless memorizations and repetitions of Latin texts.

**New Standards of Behavior** The growing admiration for the humanists and their teachings also gave an important boost to the patronage of arts and letters. In the age of gunpowder, it was no longer easy to claim that physical bravery was the supreme quality of noblemen. Instead, nobles began to set themselves apart not just by seeking a humanist education but also by pa-



▲ **Raphael**

BALDASSARE CASTIGLIONE

Raphael painted this portrait of his friend, the count Baldassare Castiglione, around 1514. Castiglione's solemn pose and thoughtful expression exude the dignity and cultivation that were described as essential attributes of the courtier in Castiglione's famous book on courtly behavior.

Giraudon/Art Resource, NY

tronizing artists and writers whose praise made them famous. Thus, a new image of fine behavior, which included the qualities that Guarino fostered—a commitment to taste and elegance as well as to courage—became widely accepted. This new lifestyle was promoted in a book, *The Courtier*, written in 1516 by Baldassare Castiglione, which took the form of a conversation among the sophisticated men and women at the court of Duke Federigo Montefeltro of Urbino, Castiglione's patron. *The Courtier* became a manual of proper behavior for gentlemen and ladies for centuries.



### ▲ MAP 12.1 THE SPREAD OF UNIVERSITIES IN THE RENAISSANCE

A significant indication of the rising status accorded to learning, and the growing importance of education in general during the Renaissance, is the opening of major new universities. Even where earlier universities existed, as at Oxford, many new colleges were founded, and the number of graduates increased rapidly in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

◆ [www.mhhe.com/chambers8ch12maps](http://www.mhhe.com/chambers8ch12maps)

*Humanism Triumphant* By the mid-1400s Humanism dominated intellectual life in much of Italy, and by 1500 it was sweeping all of Europe, transmitted by its devotees and also by a recent invention, printing, which made the texts of both humanists and ancients far more easily available. Dozens of new schools and universities were

founded, and no court of any significance was without its roster of artists and writers familiar with the latest ideas. Even legal systems were affected, as the principles of Roman law (which tended to endorse the power of the ruler) were adopted in many countries. But in the late fifteenth century the revival of antiquity took a



direction that modified the commitment to the active life that had been the mark of the civic humanists. A new movement, Neoplatonism, emphasized the interest in spiritual values that was the heart of the contemplative life.

### ◆ THE FLORENTINE NEOPLATONISTS

The turn away from the practical concerns of the civic humanists toward a renewed exploration of grand ideals of truth and perfection was a result of the growing interest in Greek as well as Roman antiquity—especially the works of Plato. A group of Florentine philosophers, active in the last decades of the fifteenth century and equally at home in Greek and Latin, led the way. They were known as “Neoplatonists,” or “new” followers of Plato.

**Ficino** The most gifted of these Neoplatonists was the physician Marsilio Ficino. His career is a tribute to the cultural patronage of the Medici family, which spotted his talents as a child and gave him the use of a villa and library near Florence. In this lovely setting, a group of scholars and statesmen met frequently to discuss philosophical questions. Drawn to the idealism of Plato, Ficino and his colleagues argued that Platonic ideas demonstrated the dignity and immortality of the human soul. To spread these views among a larger audience, Ficino translated into Latin all of Plato’s dialogues and the writings of Plato’s chief followers. In his *Theologica Platonica* (1469), he made an ambitious effort to reconcile Platonic philosophy and the Christian religion.

**Pico** Another member of the group was Count Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who thought he could reconcile all philosophies in order to show that there was a single truth that lay behind every quest for the ideal. In 1486 Pico sought to defend publicly, in Rome, some nine hundred theses that would show the essential unity of all philosophies. The pope, fearful that the theses contained several heretical propositions, forbade the disputation, but Pico’s introductory “Oration on the Dignity of Man” remains one of the supreme examples of the humanists’ optimism about the potential of the individual.

**The Philosophy of Neoplatonism** Both Ficino and Pico started from two essential assumptions. First, the entire universe is arranged in a hierarchy

of excellence, with God at the summit. Second, each being in the universe, with the exception only of God, is impelled by “natural appetite” to seek perfection; one is impelled, in other words, to achieve—or at least to contemplate—the beautiful. As Pico expressed it, humans are unique in that they are placed in the middle of the universe, linked with both the spiritual world above and the material world below. Their free will enables them to seek perfection in either direction; they are free to become all things. A clear ethic emerges from this scheme: The good life should be an effort to achieve personal perfection, and the highest human value is the contemplation of the beautiful.

These writers believed that Plato had been divinely illumined and, therefore, that Platonic philosophy and Christian belief were two wholly reconcilable faces of a single truth. Because of this synthesis, and also its passionate idealism, Neoplatonic philosophy was to be a major influence on artists and thinkers for the next two centuries.

### ◆ THE HERITAGE OF THE NEW LEARNING

Although its scholarship was often arid and difficult, fifteenth-century Italian Humanism left a deep imprint on European thought and education. The humanists greatly improved the command of Latin; they restored a large part of the Greek cultural inheritance to Western civilization; their investigations led to a mastery of other languages associated with great cultural traditions, most notably Hebrew; and they laid the basis of modern textual criticism. They also developed new ways of examining the ancient world—through archaeology, numismatics (the study of coins), and epigraphy (the study of inscriptions on buildings, statues, and the like), as well as through the study of literary texts. As for the study of history, while medieval chroniclers had looked to the past for evidence of God’s providence, the humanists used the past to illustrate human behavior and provide moral examples. They also helped standardize spelling and grammar in vernacular languages; and the Classical ideals of simplicity, restraint, and elegance of style that they promoted helped reshape Western literature.

No less important was the role of the humanists as educational reformers. The curriculum they

devised spread throughout Europe in the sixteenth century, and until the twentieth century it continued to define the standards by which the lay leaders of Western society were trained. The fact that men and women throughout Europe came to be steeped in the same classics meant that they thought and communicated in similar ways. Despite Europe's divisions and conflicts, this common humanistic education helped preserve the fundamental cultural unity of the West.

## II. Art and Artists in the Italian Renaissance

The most visible effect of Humanism and its admiration for the ancients was on the arts. Because the movement first took hold in Florence, it is not surprising that its first artistic disciples appeared among the Florentines. They had other advantages. First, the city was already famous throughout Italy for its art, because the greatest painters of the late 1200s and 1300s, Cimabue (1240–1302) and his pupil Giotto (1267–1336), were identified with Florence. Giotto, in particular, had decorated buildings from Padua to Naples and thus gained a wide audience for the sense of realism, powerful emotion, and immediacy that he created (in contrast to the formal, restrained styles of earlier artists). Second, Florence's newly wealthy citizens were ready to patronize art; and third, the city had a tradition of excellence in the design of luxury goods such as silks and gold objects. Many leading artists of the 1400s and 1500s started their careers as apprentices to goldsmiths, in whose workshops they mastered creative techniques as well as aesthetic principles that informed their painting, sculpture, and architecture.

### ◆ THREE FRIENDS

The revolution in these three disciplines was started by three friends, who were united by a determination to apply the humanists' lessons to art. They wanted to break with the styles of the immediate past and create paintings, statues, and buildings that would not merely imitate the glories of Rome but actually bring them back to life. All three went to Rome in the 1420s, hoping by direct observation and study of ancient masterpieces to



▲ Giotto  
LAMENTATION

The Florentine Giotto di Bondone (1267?–1337) was the most celebrated painter of his age. He painted fresco cycles in a number of Italian cities, and this segment from one of them indicates the qualities that made him famous: the solid bodies, the expression of human emotion, and the suggestion of landscape, all of which created an impact that was without precedent in medieval art.

Alinari/Art Resource, NY

re-create their qualities and thus fulfill the humanists' goal of reviving the spirit of Classical times. The locals thought the three very strange, for they went around measuring, taking notes, and calculating sizes and proportions. But the lessons they learned enabled them to transform the styles and purposes of art.

**Masaccio** Among the three friends, the painter Masaccio (1401–1428) used the inspiration of the ancients to put a new emphasis on nature, on three-dimensional human bodies, and on perspective. In showing Adam and Eve, he not only depicted the first nudes since antiquity but showed them coming through a rounded arch that was the mark of Roman architecture, as opposed to the pointed arch of the Middle Ages. The chapel he